

A Career Explorer's Guide to Informational Interviewing

An informational interview is an informal conversation where an individual seeks information on a career path, industry, or organization of interest from someone with knowledge or experience in these areas. They are not a job interview, nor a situation where you would necessarily ask about job openings the professional is aware of. An informational interview is more of a chance for you to get more information about a career path you are thinking of pursuing and to build a relationship with someone who may be able to provide you with tips, guidance, and mentorship over time.

Why are they useful?

Although you typically won't be asking about job opportunities during these interactions, informational interviews are great opportunities to network while gaining insight into your career options. By doing so, you get to learn about first hand experiences, impressions, and insider knowledge from someone in the field or a particular organization as well as tips on how you can prepare for your next position. Talking to people in the field can give you first-hand information that can be difficult to find online, such as information about work culture, common challenges, management styles for leaders of a particular organization, and opportunities for advancement. Other benefits of this technique include the potential to discover alternate career paths you had not previously considered or knew existed. Since informational interviews are shaped by what questions you have and what you hope to gain from the conversation, you can direct the conversation in any direction you wish. You may discuss topics ranging from understanding what a particular job entails, considering what level of education you need to advance into certain roles, what the bright spots and challenges are in working for a specific organization,

and sharing of resources for your own job search such as resume best practices, job boards to explore, conferences to attend, and more.

How to conduct a successful informational interview

There are multiple settings in which you can conduct an informational interview. Some examples are via Zoom or other virtual meeting platforms, over the phone, over coffee, or at the individual's office. Here are some steps you can take to guide you through arranging, conducting, and closing an informational interview.

Doing your research

Before reaching out to someone to set up a meeting, do some initial research on your field of interest, relevant organizations, and employees at those organizations. You can strategize this research in three ways. First, you can brainstorm who in your existing network might have valuable information to share. Think of professors, classmates, current or former colleagues, former supervisors, friends, or family members who may be able to share their experiences. Second, you can utilize the Alumni tab on the CUNY SPH LinkedIn page to find and reach out to alumni. To do this, go to the SPH school [profile](#), click "alumni," and filter the results by which field or SPH concentration you would like to know more about. You can also filter by year of graduation depending on if you would like to connect with someone who is further out from obtaining their graduate degree, or someone who is closer to the graduate school experience. Here is a demonstration of where these options are on SPH's LinkedIn page:

CUNY
SPH

CUNY Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy
New York, New York · 1,565+ alumni · 2,852 followers · 175 employees

✓ Following Visit website More

Home My Employer About Posts Jobs **Alumni** Videos

1,565 alumni

Search alumni by title, keyword or company

Start year 1900 End year 2021

Use the options in this section to filter by year, occupation, location, field of study, and more!

< Previous Next >

What they do

382 | Healthcare Services

251 | Community and Social Services

What they studied + Add

305 | Public Health

220 | Health Policy Analysis

Third, if you already have an organization of interest in mind, you can go to that organization's page on LinkedIn and click on "People" to then filter through their employees. You can also go to the organization's website and see if there are employee profiles and contact information available. Smaller organizations will sometimes have employee email addresses available on their websites, whereas this information may not be present on the websites of larger organizations.

Using these research strategies will not only help you identify a contact to reach out to, but will help you go into an informational interview with more background knowledge on the types of pathways, organizations, and connections that are out there.

It will also be beneficial to read some job descriptions that are the same or similar to that of the person you are connecting with. You are not at all expected to be an expert, but having read a couple of job descriptions for that job title is a great way to gain base knowledge about a role. This will help you avoid asking questions that can easily be found online during the informational interview. Doing this reading upfront lets the professional you are meeting with see that you are genuinely interested in their work and will keep them more invested in the conversation.

Are there any timing considerations with informational interviewing?

Informational interviews should focus on learning and not trying to get a leg up in an ongoing hiring process after you have already applied for a job. These requests should be sent to people at organizations you'd like to learn more about well before you are an active applicant. If you are an active applicant for a position with an organization or are about to apply for a role at an organization, that is typically not the right time to reach out for an informational interview request.

What information do you want to gain from this connection?

After conducting some initial research, decide what it is that you want to know. Preparing questions to ask the interviewee is a good step to take before reaching out to them. This allows you to figure out for yourself what exactly it is that you want to know or gain from the interaction. It also helps you give them more information in the initial outreach such as "I was hoping to learn more about x, y, and z and see that you have experience in those areas."

Be strategic with your questions and don't ask anything too personal such as "what is your salary?" Instead, you might ask something more along the lines of "what is the work/life balance of this career?" or "what are the general salary ranges one can expect for entry, mid-level, and senior positions in this line of work?" When listening to the responses you receive, keep in mind that there is no single pathway to get to the career you want. Everyone's journey is different, especially in public health, a field where diversity of experience and background is encouraged! Your interviewee's answers will reveal just one possible pathway to get you where you want to be or to help you figure this out if you are feeling unsure of your career path. Here are some common questions that are asked during informational interviews that you can use as guidance.

Sample questions:

1. Can you tell me about what got you interested in this line of work/company?
2. Can you tell me a bit about your career path and what led you to this position?
3. What skills have you found the most useful, or do you think will be the most useful within the next 5-10 years in this field?
4. What does a typical day of work look like for you?
5. What are some projects that you are working on right now?
6. What do you like most about your work, and what are some of your dislikes?
7. What are some challenges or problems that you face in this line of work?
8. What is your work life balance like? Does it vary depending on someone's ranking in the company/field?
9. Can you talk me through what entry level job titles in this line of work are and what titles indicate mid-range or leadership positions??
10. When you were job searching, what resources or strategies did you use that were the most helpful?

11. Are there any other companies or colleagues that you recommend I look into exploring or connecting with?

Contact the professional

Email and LinkedIn are great channels to use to reach out to professionals you would like to interview. If you are reaching out via email, begin by introducing yourself with your name and mentioning how you found out about this person. Next, provide some brief information on your educational and/or professional background and what you are looking to pursue. Emphasize that you are looking for information, not a job. Close the body of the text by asking if they have a brief moment (20-30 minutes) to answer some questions for you. As with any networking technique, be considerate of the individual's busy schedule. An example of what a message like this might look like is shown below (adapted from Indeed):

Subject: Alex Maskowitz—informational interview request

Dear Ms. Sundar,

My name is Alex Maskowitz and I am an MPH student at the CUNY Graduate School of Public Health & Health Policy. I am currently exploring careers in health administration and I see that you've built your career in this space.

As the Fundraising Director at Public Health, Inc., I am sure you have organized many charitable events. I would love to learn more about what your position entails as it will help guide my own career direction.

I know you must have a busy schedule, but if you have a brief moment of free time (20-30 minutes) I would be very excited to meet with you for an informational interview. I am generally free on weekdays from 12 - 1pm and Thursdays from 4pm onward. Please let me know if these times work for a quick Zoom or phone call or if we can arrange something else.

Thank you in advance for your time.

*Kind regards,
Alex Maskowitz”*

If you are using LinkedIn to build connections and do not have a Premium account, you will not be able to message the contact straight away. In order to be able to message them, you should first send a connection request and attach a note to your request to connect. In the preliminary note (which has a 300 character length limit), you should briefly introduce yourself and what your intentions of connecting are. This might read something like:

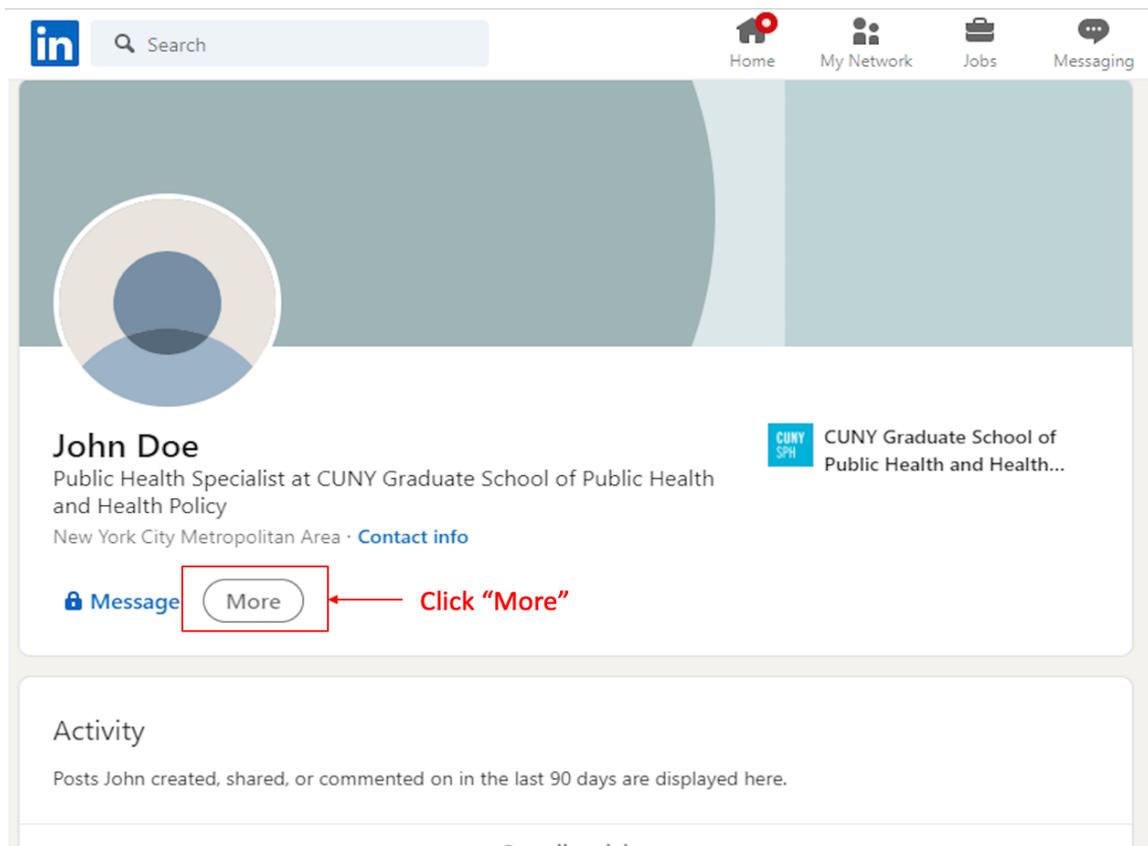
“Hi {THEIR NAME},

My name is {YOUR NAME}. I am currently a student at CUNY SPH studying {CONCENTRATION} and am looking to learn more about your career path. I look forward to connecting!

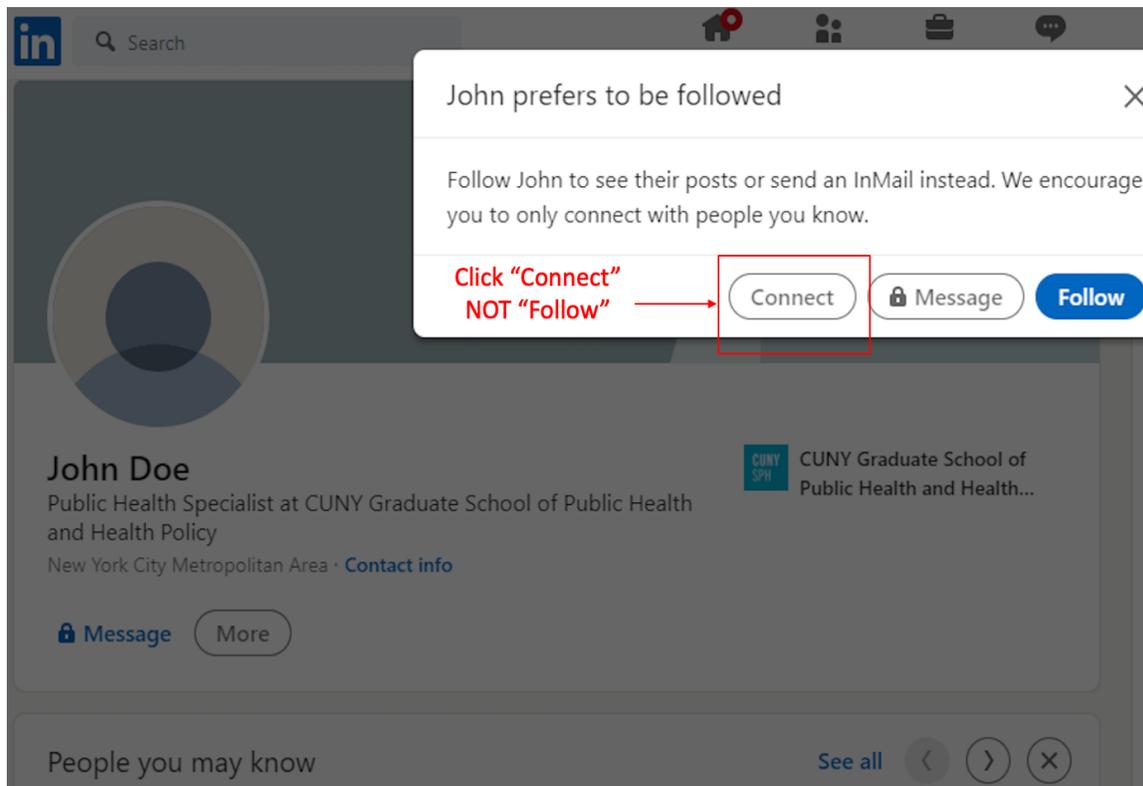
Best, {YOUR NAME}.”

Since there is a character limit for these initial connection notes, it is ok to keep them short and to the point. Once they've accepted your request, you can then message them in more detail and request an informational interview (see further down in this guide for how you might structure this request). A step-by-step guide for how to connect on LinkedIn is shown below:

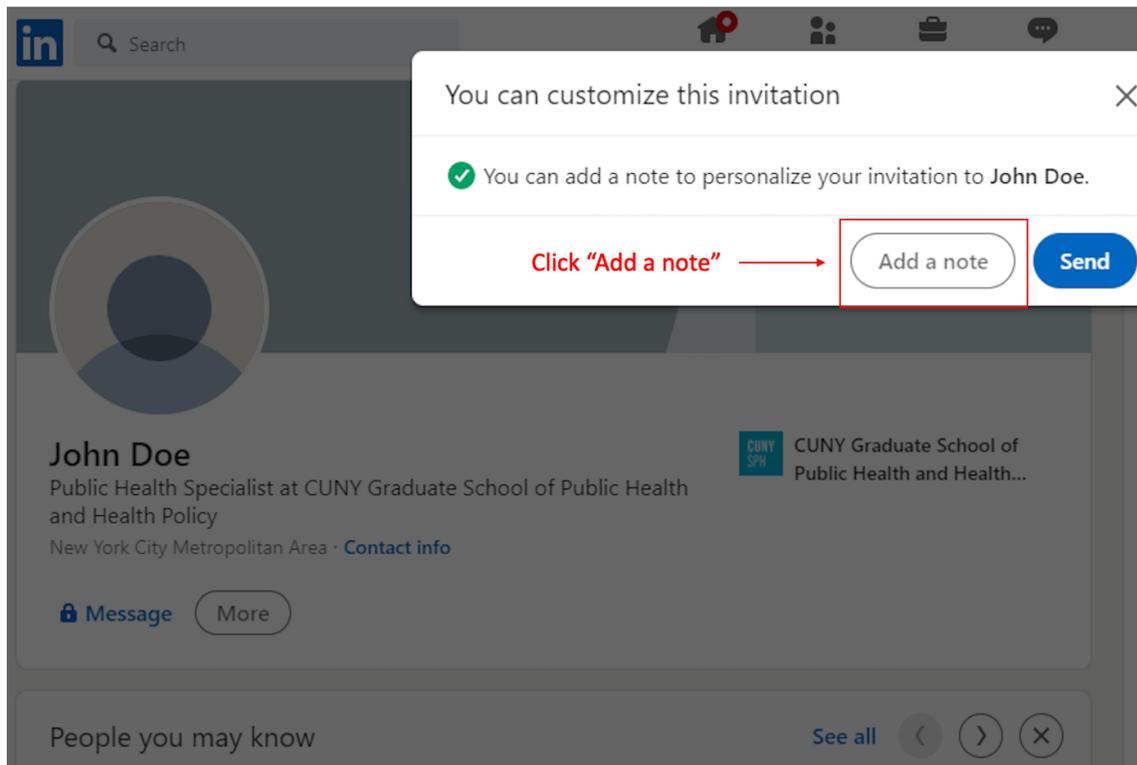
STEP 1: Go to the individual's profile and click "More"



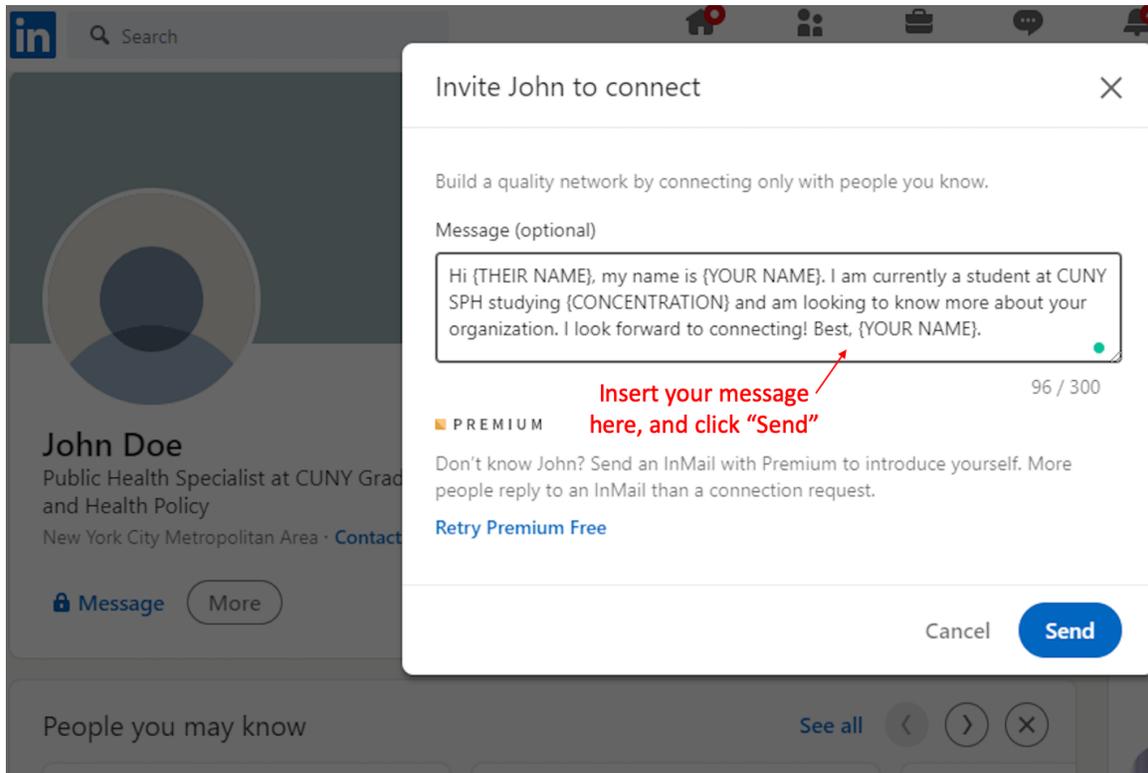
STEP 2: Click “Connect”



STEP 3: Click “Add a note”



STEP 4: Add your message and click “Send”



How to Structure the Informational Interview

It is good to open the informational interview by building some rapport between you and the professional you are speaking with. Open by asking how their day is going and mention something light such as the weather. Rather than jumping right into questions, this helps to make the conversation a bit more friendly and lightweight. You can then introduce yourself using your elevator pitch which is a brief introduction to your experience and interests followed by

what you hope to learn from this conversation. Although you've already introduced yourself via email, it is always nice to do so again in person and be able to provide them with a bit more detail. This might help them better answer some of the questions that you have for them and will help you build a stronger relationship with them.

Once the questioning begins, be sure to listen carefully and allow the person room to take as long as they need to respond. Being an attentive listener and not just waiting for your turn to respond will allow you to be present and really absorb the information they are sharing. It is also important to keep an eye on the clock to make sure you are conscious of the time and check in with them if you are going over. It will be up to them whether they would like to continue the conversation past the allotted time.

Finally, at the close of the informational interview, be sure to thank them for their time and follow-up via email within 24 hours. You can structure this message by 1) including a greeting, 2) thanking them again for their time, 3) stating what you gained from the interaction, 4) offer some form of help or advice back to them, 5) acknowledging that you look forward to staying in touch, and 6) closing with a professional salutation and your name. Here is an example of what this follow-up email might look like:

"Hi {THEIR NAME},

Thank you again for taking time to speak with me today. I really enjoyed learning about your career in public health communications and look forward to using your advice on creating an Excel sheet to organize my job search. I would love to stay in touch and will plan to keep you updated about what I'm up to. Should there ever be any way that I can be a resource for you, please don't hesitate to reach out.

Thank you again and I look forward to staying in touch.

Sincerely,

{YOUR NAME}"

Staying in touch after the informational interview will help you maintain this connection and build up your network. It is recommended to be in touch twice a year. One good strategy to accomplish this is to reach out around the holidays or with a Happy New Year email, and during the summer time to check in and provide updates about how your year has been so far. Additionally, if you happen to come across any conferences, events, or interesting news stories or articles about something happening in your shared field of interest, you can use that as an opportunity to reach out. Doing this will help establish a two-way relationship by showing them that you would like to offer them something back.

Going forward, should you end up applying for a position at the organization they work at, that is a great time to reach back out to them to share this update. You do not want to ask them for a referral, which may put them on the spot. Instead, let them know that it was great speaking with them previously about their experience at the organization and you are now applying for the role and will plan to keep them updated about how things progress. At that point, if they would like to offer to make a referral, they can do so if they are comfortable doing so and they feel that it is appropriate, but it would be up to them to offer that or not. Additionally, you can mention in your cover letter for the role that you spoke with them and you can share what they shared with you about the organization which motivated you to want to work for them. This will make your documents stand out amongst others who have not taken the time to get to know people at the organization.